



Local Product Branding Strategy in Building Consumer Loyalty in the Digital Era

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the influence of cultural proximity, local relevance, and emotional attachment on consumer loyalty, with digital engagement mediating the variables in the context of local products in the digital era. The rapid transformation of digital technology has reshaped how consumers interact with brands, requiring local branding strategies to adapt to the dynamics of digital behavior. A quantitative research approach was employed using a survey method involving 191 respondents who were consumers of roti Maros, a local bakery product from South Sulawesi Province. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with WarpPLS software to assess direct and indirect relationships among the studied variables. The findings reveal that cultural proximity significantly affects digital engagement but does not directly influence consumer loyalty. In contrast, local relevance and emotional attachment significantly positively affect digital engagement and consumer loyalty. The mediation test further indicates that cultural proximity and local relevance through digital engagement do not considerably affect loyalty, whereas emotional attachment mediated by digital engagement exerts a significant impact. The more frequent the interactions through digital media, the greater the likelihood of cultural values becoming blurred, driving consumer loyalty more by emotional factors than cultural closeness. From a managerial perspective, local business owners and brand developers are encouraged to integrate cultural identity and local narratives into their digital communication strategies while fostering authentic emotional experiences through online community engagement. Such efforts are essential to sustain consumer loyalty and strengthen the competitiveness of local brands in the digital economy.

Keywords: Branding; Consumer Loyalty; Digital Era; Local Products; Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumer loyalty is not only understood as a repetitive habit of buying a brand, but also as a form of cognitive and affective commitment that encourages consumers to continue to choose the brand despite many alternatives. Loyalty is born from the accumulation of positive experiences, consistency of quality, and trust built in the long term. Customer loyalty refers to a consumer's strong psychological commitment to consistently repurchase the same product or service in the coming period, despite situational pressures or competitors' marketing activities that could influence purchasing decisions (Oliver, 1999).

Digital transformation has changed the way consumers interact with brands. Today, loyalty is built through face-to-face interactions in physical stores and various digital channels such as social media, online reviews, and real-time shopping experiences. Through these interactions, consumers gain access to information and social validation, which ultimately influences the purchasing decision-making process, especially emotional attachment, so that consumer loyalty can be formed sustainably. Studies show that brand storytelling, customer engagement through social media, and customer experience personalization can increase

loyalty and emotional attachment to a brand (Wardhana, 2024). Consumers are increasingly selective in choosing products, and their preferences are influenced by various factors such as brand image, product quality, and digital interactions built by business actors (Keller, 2013).

Local products face unique dynamics in building loyalty in the digital age. On the one hand, local products have capital in the form of cultural values, origin stories, and the uniqueness of the production process that can attract consumers. However, they compete with global brands with more established resources and reputations. Local brand development through community-based marketing management can improve regional image by strengthening cultural identity and local wisdom inherent in products (Ratnawita et al., 2023).

Local branding strategies can be strengthened through three main dimensions: cultural proximity, local relevance, and emotional attachment. Cultural proximity makes consumers feel that the brand represents their identity, while local relevance ensures the product fits real needs in the local context. On the other hand, emotional attachment deepens the consumer's relationship with the brand. Several factors can hinder the effectiveness of branding in building loyalty, such as inconsistencies in branding strategies and inadequate quality of service (Wijaya, 2024). A lack of understanding of branding has a negative impact, including a lack of consumer trust and limited marketing (Fathonah et al., 2024). Further research is needed to develop marketing strategies that leverage ethnocentrism and cultural identity to strengthen consumers' attachment to local brands (Duc & Mujahida, 2024).

Emotional attachment has a special role in bridging consumers' functional experience and loyal behavior. Emotionally attached consumers tend to make repeat purchases, stand up for brands when faced with criticism, and provide recommendations to others. Emotional brand attachment and love serve as a significant mediation mechanism in the transition from consumer satisfaction to brand loyalty, where satisfaction triggers emotional attachment and affection to the brand, further strengthening consumer commitment and loyalty (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). In the digital context, this can be built through authentic storytelling, responsive interactions, and online community programs that actively engage consumers.

Local relevance is also increasingly important in the digital era. Using local languages, product adjustments according to regional preferences, and collaboration with local cultural figures can strengthen consumer relationships. Applying proper marketing tactics contributes significantly to forming and strengthening corporate image (Pahmi et al., 2023). In the context of local relevance, these findings confirm that marketing strategies tailored to cultural characteristics, consumer needs, and local market dynamics can strengthen the public's positive perception of companies while increasing competitiveness at the regional level. With the

support of digital technology, local brands now have a broader opportunity to reach out and build personal relationships with consumers.

This research will explore various branding elements that can significantly impact consumer loyalty. The quantitative approach in this study will provide a clearer understanding of how these elements contribute to purchasing decisions and consumer attachment to local creative products. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide practical recommendations for creative MSMEs to develop more effective branding strategies in the digital era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS

The basic theory often used in understanding consumer behavior is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991). This theory explains that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavior control influence behavioral intentions. Regarding consumer loyalty, TPB is relevant because positive attitudes towards brands, social norms supporting local product consumption, and the perception of ease of access will strengthen consumers' intention to remain loyal. The application of TPB in the context of branding through a meta-analysis approach can explain the relationship between brand value perception, attitudes, and consumer behavioral intentions. An adaptive marketing approach not only depends on demographic and economic aspects but must also pay attention to cultural dynamics that continue to evolve along with globalization and digitalization. Integrating cultural factors and digital marketing strategies has been proven to increase the effectiveness of brand communication and strengthen the emotional connection between consumers and products (Rachwal-Mueller & Fedotova, 2024). In the digital context, cultural proximity can affect consumer engagement through socially and emotionally relevant content. Integrating technology approaches and cultural sensitivity is key to building sustainable digital engagement and strengthening social connectivity (Marchesani et al., 2025).

Consumer loyalty includes satisfaction, trust, service quality, and perceived value, where these factors directly or indirectly shape consumer commitment and increase the tendency to remain loyal to a brand or product (Rahayu & Harsono, 2023). Loyalty is crucial in creating a sustainable competitive advantage, especially in a market with brand choices. Brand loyalty can be understood through three main dimensions, namely emotional (*heart*), cognitive (*head*), and behavioral (*hand*) aspects, where the integration of these three plays an important role in strengthening consumer commitment and maintaining the sustainability of

loyalty to the brand (Dapena-Baron et al., 2020). Therefore, loyalty comes not only from functional benefits, but also from the psychological connection consumers feel.

Local branding strategies emphasize three important aspects, namely cultural proximity, local relevance, and emotional attachment. Brand culture and iconic brands significantly influence purchasing decisions (Ilahiyyah & Harti, 2022). This relevance is even stronger due to the proximity of consumer culture to the local values raised in the brand, so that the iconic image of the product not only increases appeal but also strengthens the emotional attachment of consumers to the products of the region. Local relevance ensures that products adapt to the needs and preferences of the local community. Meanwhile, consumers' emotional attachment to brands on social media plays an important role in increasing brand equity, where intense digital interactions strengthen consumers' sense of closeness and affection towards brands, thereby encouraging the formation of long-term loyalty (Dwivedi & Gil, 2018). Branding has a strategic role in increasing consumer loyalty, where strong brand identity, message consistency, and product differentiation have been proven to drive emotional attachment and consumer commitment (Wijaya, 2024).

The development of digital technology presents an excellent opportunity for local brands to build consumer loyalty. Social media, e-commerce, and interactive platforms allow brands to reach a wider audience and create more personalized two-way communication. The implementation of digital marketing has a positive and significant influence on consumer loyalty to MSMEs in Kendari City, where the optimal use of digital platforms not only expands market access but also increases the intensity of interaction with customers to strengthen consumer commitment to local products in the digital era (Asrul, 2025). In addition, Sheth (2021) emphasizes that the digital era allows for the formation of digital engagement, where consumer involvement in the online space significantly increases their satisfaction and loyalty to the brand.

From these considerations, the following hypotheses emerge:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Cultural proximity positively affects consumer loyalty mediated by digital engagement.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Local relevance positively affects consumer loyalty mediated by digital engagement.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Emotional attachment positively affects consumer loyalty mediated by digital engagement.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative approach was used in this study, using a survey method aimed at consumers of local products in South Sulawesi Province, especially consumers of Roti Maros. This approach was chosen because it provided an objective, measurable, and systematic picture of the relationship between the variables studied. The survey method is used because it can collect primary data directly from respondents relevant to the research context. The survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire based on marketing theories and consumer behavior, especially related to brand equity, brand image, brand experience, and consumer loyalty. The questionnaire was compiled using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Before the widespread dissemination of the questionnaire, the validity and reliability of the instrument were tested on a small number of respondents (limited trials) to ensure that each item had a good level of clarity, relevance, and internal consistency.

This study uses a multivariate statistical analysis technique, namely Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), with the help of WarpPLS software. SEM techniques were chosen because they could test complex causal relationships between latent variables, either directly or indirectly. The research location was set in South Sulawesi Province, focusing mainly on consumers of Roti Maros, a local product that has become an icon of Makassar's typical souvenirs. The selection of Roti Maros as the research object was based on several considerations. First, Roti Maros has a strong brand image among local people and tourists alike, making it an ideal representation to examine loyalty behavior towards local brands. Second, this product has been able to survive in the midst of competition from modern and national bakery products, which shows that there is an interesting branding strategy to be researched further. Third, Roti Maros has a broad and diverse consumer base, thus providing an adequate variety of data for empirical analysis.

The study population is all consumers who have bought and consumed Roti Maros products in the South Sulawesi region. However, to obtain more focused results, this study set a sample criterion: consumers who have made a repurchase. These criteria are important because consumer loyalty is reflected in consistent repeat purchase behavior. The selected respondents are considered to have sufficient experience in assessing product quality and brand image. The sampling technique uses purposive sampling, the deliberate selection of respondents based on specific criteria relevant to the research's purpose.

The number of samples in this study was 191 people, which was considered adequate for SEM-PLS analysis based on the minimum sample size recommendation (Hair et al., 2021), more than 10 times the number of indicators in the latent construct tested. Data was collected by

distributing questionnaires directly to consumers at several strategic points, such as souvenir centers, official Maros bakeries, and public areas in Makassar and Maros. Data collection was conducted over two months to ensure the representativeness of respondents from various demographic segments.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis in this study illustrate the relationship between Cultural Proximity (X1), Local Relevance (X2), Emotional Attachment (X3), Digital Engagement (X4), and Consumer Loyalty (Y). The resulting structural model shows the direction and strength of influence between variables, both directly and through the role of mediation. The following presents a visualization of the analysis model results to clarify these findings.

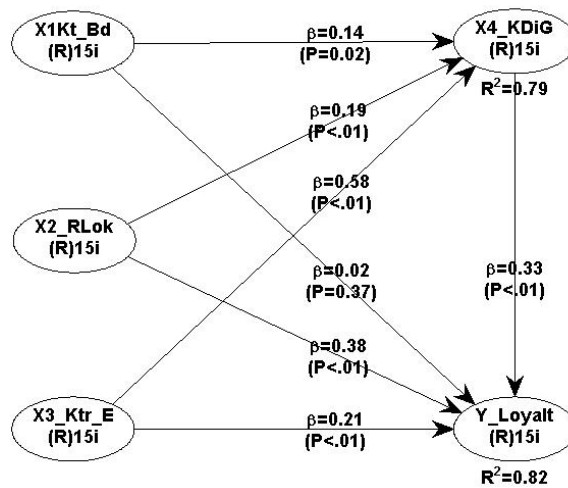


Figure 1. SEM Test Results.

Note: X1Kt_Bd = Cultural Proximity; X2_RLok = Local Relevance; X3_Ktr_E = Emotional Attachment; X4_KDIG = Digital Engagement; Y_Loyalt = Consumer Loyalty.

The results showed that cultural proximity, local relevance, and emotional attachment significantly affected digital engagement. Cultural proximity had a positive effect with a coefficient of 0.142. Cultural proximity describes how a user or consumer feels that digital content, brand, or marketing communications are integrated with their cultural values, symbols, linguistics, and norms. Audiences tend to choose content that is culturally "close" to them, i.e., language, symbols, narratives, and familiar contexts, because this facilitates the cognitive and emotional process of understanding and responding to the content (J. Straubhaar, 2021). In the context of digital engagement, if users feel that digital content (e.g., local brand campaigns) reflects their culture, then the commitment to engage in interactions such as likes, comments, or sharing will increase due to the emergence of a sense of recognition and shared identity.

Local relevance also has a positive effect with a coefficient of 0.190. Local relevance refers to how digital content, brand messages, or marketing activities align with the local context, such as regional languages, local consumption habits, community values, or regional symbols. Content explicitly associated with a local location or culture tends to gain higher levels of digital engagement because users feel "counted" in the communication. This aligns with Setyawan et al. (2024), who researched local brand development, which raises regional image through community-based marketing management. A study in Indonesia found that the relevance of content as a mediator strengthens the influence of contextual advertising on e-engagement on local brands' Instagram followers (Wibowo et al., 2025).

Emotional attachment showed the most decisive influence with a coefficient of 0.581. Emotional attachment describes psychological closeness: a user's sympathy, familiarity, trust, or love for a brand, platform, or digital content. Research on digital contexts shows that when users have an emotional attachment, they tend to engage in more active digital activities such as commenting, sharing content, or returning to the platform because there is an intrinsic motivation that goes beyond just utilitarianism. A study on e-commerce livestreaming found that intense interactions increase emotional attachment, positively affecting user engagement (Nugraha et al., 2024). This proves that the greater the value of cultural proximity, local relevance, and emotional attachment brands build, the higher the consumers' digital engagement.

Table 1. Data Analysis Results.

Variable	Coefficients and P values	Description
Cultural Proximity → Digital Engagement	0.142 (0.022)**	Affect
Cultural Proximity → Consumer Loyalty	0.024 (0.371)	Has no effect
Local Relevance → Digital Engagement	0.190 (0.004)**	Affect
Local Relevance → Consumer Loyalty	0.385 (0.000)***	Affect
Emotional Engagement → Digital Engagement	0.581 (0.000)***	Affect
Emotional Attachment → Consumer Loyalty	0.206 (0.002)	Affect
Cultural Proximity → Digital Engagement → Consumer Loyalty	0.047 (0.180)	Has no effect
Local Relevance → Digital Engagement → Consumer Loyalty	0.062 (0.110)	Has no effect
Emotional Engagement → Digital Engagement → Consumer Loyalty	0.190 (0.000)***	Affect
Digital Engagement → Consumer Loyalty	0.328 (0.000)***	Affect

Note: ** = sig < 0.05; *** = sig ≤ 0.000

Source: Processed Data (2025).

Cultural proximity has no significant effect on consumer loyalty, with a coefficient of 0.024, which means that the similarity of values, norms, and cultural symbols between

consumers and brands is not the main factor in forming a loyal commitment to a product or service. Theoretically, these results contradict the classic view in the cross-cultural marketing literature that emphasizes that cultural proximity can strengthen trust and affinity for brands, thereby increasing loyalty (J. D. Straubhaar, 1991). However, in the context of this study, the influence was not statistically significant, suggesting that cultural proximity only has a peripheral role in building consumer loyalty, not a major determinant factor (Hafeez et al., 2021).

This phenomenon can be explained through a change in modern consumer behavior that is increasingly rational and value-oriented, where consumers value functional qualities and emotional benefits more than mere cultural proximity. Pergeseran menuju konsumerisme sadar, di mana konsumen modern memprioritaskan praktik etis dan berkelanjutan, menghargai kualitas fungsional dan manfaat emosional daripada kedekatan budaya (Karunia, 2024). This trend is especially evident among Millennials and Gen Z, influenced by socio-cultural factors. In the digital age, brand communication must be clear, consistent, and authentic to foster trust and loyalty. Consumers prioritize emotional connections and value-based experiences over cultural bonds, making purposeful communication essential for long-term customer loyalty and competitive advantage (Tomar, 2025).

In addition, this study's results align with the study of Hafeez et al. (2021), which examines the relationship between the cultural dimension of Hofstede and brand loyalty in Pakistan. The study found that cultural dimensions such as collectivism, masculinity, and power distance did not significantly affect consumer loyalty. This shows that culture does not always directly influence loyal behavior, especially when the market has experienced value homogenization due to globalization and media digitalization. Consumers may feel culturally close to a particular brand, but without satisfaction and trust, the relationship is not an ongoing loyalty (Pratama et al., 2025). This means that cultural closeness may have an indirect effect through increased positive perceptions, but it is not a direct factor determining loyalty.

On the other hand, local relevance and emotional attachment have a positive effect on consumer loyalty, with a coefficient of 0.385 and 0.206, which means that the higher the consumer's perception of the local relevance of a brand, the stronger the loyalty formed. These findings reinforce the view that brands that highlight local values can create a sense of social connectedness and community pride, increasing consumer loyalty (Azzahra et al., 2024). In this context, consumers view culturally and geographically close brands as part of their social identity, so they are more likely to maintain a long-term relationship with the brand (Prabowo et al., 2025). Individuals tend to be loyal to entities representing their group's values and

identity. Strong local relevance reinforces a sense of belonging towards the brand, fostering loyal behaviors such as repurchases and positive recommendations (Sathyanarayan & Subburaj, 2021). A brand's success in adapting local cultural symbols, narratives, and values is important in strengthening consumers' emotional commitment to the brand.

Emotional attachment also strengthens the psychological bond between consumers and brands, making consumers more resistant to the influence of competitors and more likely to engage in *positive* word of mouth (Hajjid et al., 2022). These results confirm that consumer loyalty is rational, based on the product's functional benefits, and stems from a sustained emotional connection. Local relevance and emotional attachment reinforce each other in shaping consumer loyalty. Brands that authentically present local narratives and build emotional closeness tend to gain higher loyalty. Brands with a strong local image will create *brand identification* that strengthens emotional connections and ultimately increases loyalty (Azzahra et al., 2024). Modern marketing strategies combining locality and emotional approaches have proven more effective than rational promotion-based strategies (Prabowo et al., 2025). Local brand development through community-based marketing management is important in strengthening the region's image and creating more authentic consumer engagement (Setyawan et al., 2024). This strategy allows brands to tap into local social and cultural potential as a source of differentiation, thereby strengthening consumers' emotional connection and loyalty to local products.

In addition, digital engagement has been shown to have a significant effect on consumer loyalty with a coefficient of 0.328 meaning that the higher the level of consumer participation in a brand's digital activities, the greater their tendency to show loyalty to the brand (Bazi et al., 2020). Digital engagement here includes active consumer interaction through social media, digital apps, and online platforms that provide a participatory space for two-way communication between brands and their consumers. Engaging, interactive, and personalized digital experiences can spark a sense of emotional connectedness, which is the foundation for building loyalty and sustainability (Listiorini, 2025).

The results of the mediation test showed that cultural proximity and local relevance through digital engagement did not affect consumer loyalty. Successful localization involves more than just language adjustments; it requires deep cultural integration and sensitivity in brand expression (Shu, 2024). Culture-based interactions are often symbolic and do not always result in a long-term commitment to the brand. Cultural proximity can strengthen digital interactions under certain conditions, but it is not enough to guarantee consumer loyalty (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2021). Because the engagement may still be interaction or

identification, it has not yet led to a commitment to loyalty (Zhang & Li, 2022). Cultural proximity can increase digital engagement, but does not directly influence consumer loyalty. Consumers feel more interested in interacting with local products when cultural elements are displayed in their branding strategy, for example, through symbols, stories, or cultural identities. However, these interactions do not automatically form long-term loyalty. Loyalty requires more than a sense of cultural closeness; It demands real benefits and a consistent consumer experience. In other words, cultural proximity is an entry point that connects consumers to brands, but not as the final factor determining loyalty.

Meanwhile, local relevance also fails to play a role through digital engagement. When a brand can showcase its identity, values, and local needs in its products, consumers will show loyalty without going through intense digital interactions. Consumers prioritize functional experiences over representations of locality in an online context (Bruckberger et al., 2023). Local relevance builds a positive perception of the brand (attitude), which drives loyalty, but the mediation mechanism through digital engagement has never been consistently proven (Zhang & Li, 2022). Local linkages have proven to be important in increasing digital participation and strengthening consumer loyalty through the formation of trust and emotional bonding. Tiwari (2025) indicates that local brands have a stronger resonance in the eyes of consumers due to their cultural value, suitability, and affordability, which is a key factor in creating ongoing loyalty. According to the local social, economic, and lifestyle contexts, products that meet real needs will be easier for consumers to accept and maintain. For example, consumers feel that the product is genuinely relevant to their lives when a local brand presents products at affordable prices, packaging according to local preferences, or communications that use the local language. This relevance strengthens the reasons consumers remain loyal to these local products. Strong local linkages deepen the emotional connection between consumers and brands and strengthen the effectiveness of digital strategies oriented to cultural values (Yusup et al., 2025). Integrating local elements in the digital branding narrative is key to building sustainable consumer loyalty while encouraging the growth of an inclusive and competitive creative economy ecosystem.

The most dominant variable in the results of this study was emotional attachment, which not only had a direct effect on consumer loyalty but also worked through digital engagement as a mediating variable. This means that consumers with a strong emotional attachment to the product tend to be more actively involved in digital channels, for example, by sharing content, participating in online campaigns, or participating in digital communities. Li et al. (2020) confirmed that brand attachment and customer trust significantly strengthen the

relationship between digital interactions on social media and brand loyalty, suggesting that emotional bonds form the basis of long-term consumer commitment. Digital engagement serves as a form of passive participation and a psychological mechanism linking emotional experiences to loyal behavior (Rasool et al., 2020). Furthermore, emotional attachment strongly predicts customer loyalty across various cultural and industry contexts, mainly when supported by relevant digital interactions (Shimul, 2022). Digital engagement is an important bridge connecting consumers' emotional aspects with loyal behavior. A successful branding strategy must balance cultural proximity, local relevance, and especially emotional attachment to sustain consumer loyalty.

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural factors play an early role in increasing consumer participation in digital activities, but they are not strong enough to form loyalty without a deep emotional bond. In contrast, local relevance has been shown to significantly affect digital engagement and consumer loyalty significantly, confirming that integrating local values in digital marketing strategies can strengthen trust and create a closer emotional connection between consumers and brands. Meanwhile, emotional attachment significantly affects digital engagement and consumer loyalty, showing that emotional factors are key in bridging the relationship between digital interaction and brand loyalty.

However, the results of the mediation test showed that cultural proximity and local relevance through digital engagement did not significantly affect consumer loyalty. The literature supports that cultural aspects are important for interaction, but loyalty requires more (e.g., emotional attachment, perception of quality, trust). The primary mechanism is positive local brand perception and trust in the brand, not just digital activities. This condition shows that digital engagement has not been fully able to strengthen the indirect influence of cultural and local factors on loyalty. One possibility that arises is that the more intense the interaction through digital media, the greater the tendency for shifting values and obscuring cultural aspects, so that the cultural essence that is the initial attraction of local brands has the potential to weaken. In contrast, emotional attachment through digital engagement has significantly influenced consumer loyalty, confirming that emotional connection remains the most powerful mediation channel in building long-term brand loyalty. Digital engagement has a selective mediating role, where its effectiveness depends heavily on the strength of the emotional attachment between consumers and brands. Therefore, an effective branding strategy should

incorporate cultural values, local relevance, and emotional dimensions in the digital ecosystem to maintain the uniqueness of local identity while strengthening consumer loyalty.

As a practical implication, local businesses and brand developers must consistently integrate local cultural identities and narratives in digital communications while creating authentic emotional experiences through online community interactions. Further research is recommended to delve deeper into the role of additional mediating variables, such as brand trust, quality perception, and consumer satisfaction, and expand the study's context on various creative industry subsectors to enhance the relevance and generalization of these findings.

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